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CH'AN NEWSLETTER

No. 19 February 1982

WHERE IS MY MASTER?

When Ch'an Master Kao-feng Yüan-miao (1238-1295) met up with Ch'an Master Hsüeh-yen Tsu-ch'in (1216-1287), the latter asked the former: "You've been practicing for so long. At this point, can you be your own master during the daytime?" (That is to say, do you have a good control over yourself - you don't think about things you don't want to think about and you don't do what you don't want to do.) Kao-feng immediately replied: "Yes, I can!" This is already a very good accomplishment. Only someone who has practiced for a long time would be able to say this of himself.

Then Hsüeh-yen questioned him a second time: "At night in your dreams, can you be your own master?" And again Kao-feng answered promptly: "Yes, I can!"

Hsüeh-yen asked a third question: "When you are sleeping without any dreams, where is the master then?"

Now Kao-feng had already been working on the "Wu" kung-an for quite a long time. Upon being asked this question he was completely stumped. He repeated the question to himself but could not give an answer. So Hsüeh-yen told Kao-feng: "From now on, do not study any Buddha Dharma, don't read any sutras or sastras. Just do not bother about anything. Just practice well. And how should you practice? When you are hungry, eat. When you are tired, go to sleep. When you have slept enough, get up and practice well."

From that time onward, Kao-feng indeed just listened to the master's words. When he was hungry, he ate, when he felt tired, he went to sleep, and just tried very hard to practice. What did he practice on? He asked himself: "Where is my master?" He kept on using this method for five years. Even during his sleep, he continued asking, "Where is my master?"

There are various stages involved here. The first one is the question of whether we can be our own master during the daytime. What we do not want to think, we will not think about; what we do not want to do, we will not do.

How many of you can be your own master in this sense? Why is it that you cannot be your own master? The fact that Master Kao-feng could answer positively to the first question indicates that he is already on a higher level than an ordinary person.

To be able to be one's own master in dreams requires even a deeper level of practice. It means that you can control your own behavior in your dreams, and moreover, you can control the type and content of the dreams. While dreaming, your mind is very clear. You will not have random or meaningless dreams. This kind of person is actually still practicing while dreaming. He always maintains right mindfulness, or virtuous thoughts, that is, he will not do or think anything in the dream which are not considered permissible in daily life. To be one's own master in your dreams means that you continue the same practice that you are doing during the day. If you prostrate to the Buddha during the day, then you will continue prostrating in the dream. If you recite Buddha's name, then even in dreams you still recite Buddha's name. If you are delivering sentient beings, then you also deliver sentient beings in your dreams. If you are working on a kung-an, then even in dreams the kung-an will not leave you.

Not to have dreams at all is on a higher level still. There are only two kinds of people who do not have dreams when they sleep. One is the idiot, and the other is the saint, or sage. These people have dreamless sleep. They are just in a state of rest. This is very difficult to accomplish. It is already very good if you can reach the level where you no longer have any confused or evil dreams. But it is very hard for the ordinary person to get to the level of not having any dreams at all. This Ch'an Master Kao-feng had already reached the stage where, at least most of the time, he was able to sleep without dreaming. But does that mean that all of his problems had been resolved? Actually, being able to sleep without dreams only indicates that he had very good samadhi power. It doesn't mean that all his problems had been resolved. He still wasn't enlightened.

Therefore the question that Hsüeh-yen put to him was very appropriate, and it became a hua-t'ou for Kao-feng. He just kept on asking himself, "When I go to sleep and don't have any dreams, where is my master? Where is my master? Where is my master?" He kept on asking for five years, because he had a great doubt associated with this question. But we should remember that even before he started on this hua-t'ou, he had already reached the state where he could be his own master in daytime, at nighttime, and in fact, he had very few dreams. So his practice involved a very long process.

One evening he woke up from sleep and extended his hand to feel for his pillow. At that point, the pillow dropped from the sleeping platform with a thud. At that sound, Kao-feng shouted, "Aha! Now I found you!" The cloud of doubt was broken, he had emerged from the barrel of black pitch and seen the light. This is an example of one practitioner's path.

NEWS ITEMS

Shih-fu Sheng-Yen left for Taiwan on Jan. 10 and will return to New York before April 12. While in Taiwan, Shih-fu conducted the annual Winter Relief Program, distributing rice, clothing, and money among a few thousand needy people - orphans, the elderly, the handicapped, and Tibetan refugee children. He also presided over the Chinese New Years Dharma Assembly at the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture. During the four-day ceremonies, a few hundreds of people came to participate in the repentance bowing (1000 prostrations per day). Shih-fu also led a Dharma Assembly to release sentient beings (animals that would have been killed for food). He has also given a five-evening lecture series on the Vimalakirti Sutra in Taipei and a two-evening lecture to a few thousand people in Tainan. Shih-fu held two Ch'an retreats this time, with approximately 40 participants in each. Starting in March he will begin two courses at the Chinese Culture University, on the Hwa-Yen and T'ien-T'ai philosophies of Buddhism.

On Dec. 22 Prof. Jagannāth Upādhyāya, renowned professor of Pāli, Sanskrit, and Buddhist Studies at Sampurnanand Sanskrit Univ. in Varanasi, India, visited the Ch'an Center for dinner and to meet with Shih-fu regarding a possible exchange program between scholars of India and Taiwan. Accompanying the professor was Geshe Lama Losang Jamspal, a Buddhist Sanskrit scholar from Tibet.

On Sunday Jan. 24 we held our Chinese New Years celebration at the Ch'an Center. The ceremony included multiple chanting of the Great Compassion Dharani, the Heart Sutra, Sakyamuni Buddha's name, and repentance prostrations. This was followed by a special traditional Chinese lunch.

On Sat. Feb. 6 the Center held an all-day sitting. Everyone who participated felt it was useful to their practice. The next sitting will be held on Sat. Mar. 6 (starting on Fri. night 8 P.M.). This is a good opportunity for new meditators to get a preview of the Ch'an retreat.

There is a free public sitting every Wednesday evening from 7:30 to 9:15 P.M.

Ch'an Center member Dan Stevenson is now in Taiwan on a grant to complete his doctoral dissertation on T'ien-T'ai Buddhism. He is living at Shih-fu's monastery in Taipei. He will also meet with scholars in Japan before returning to the U.S.

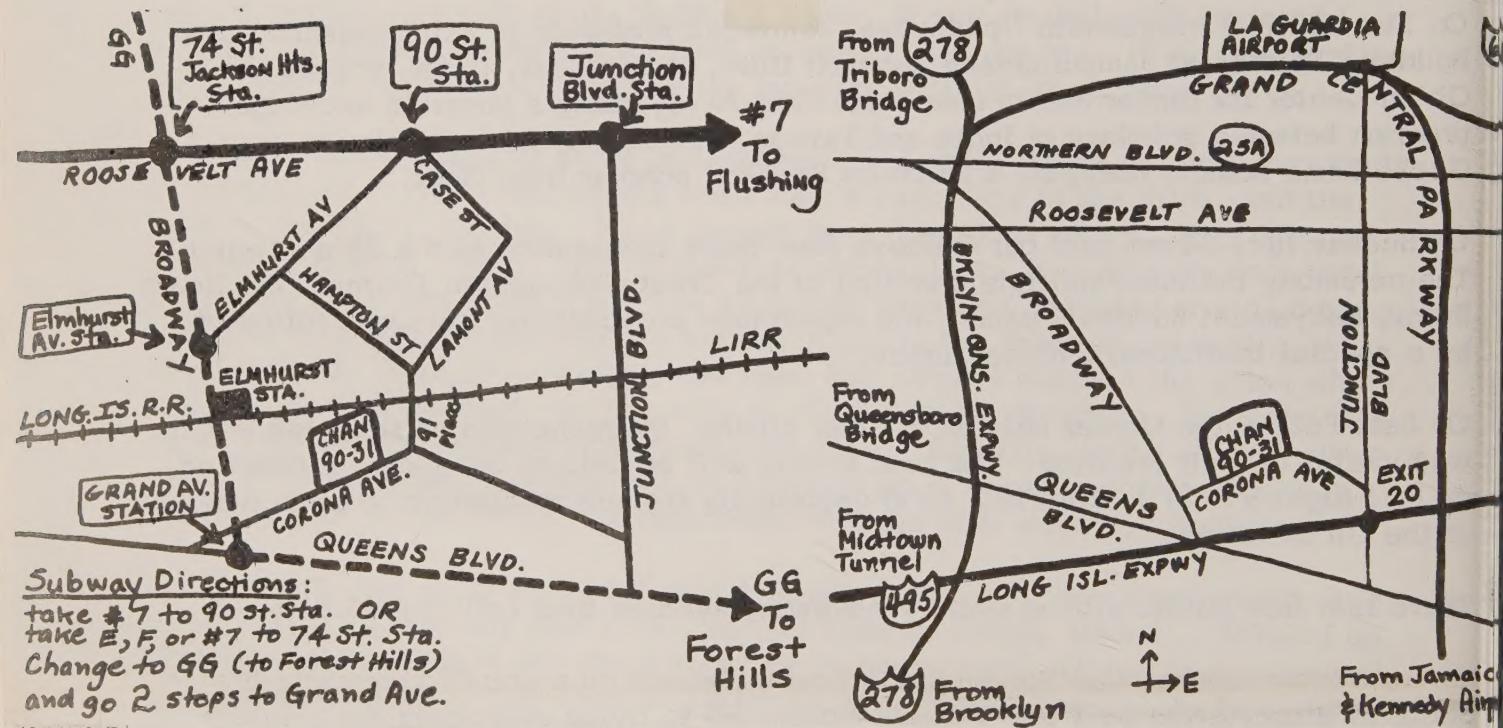
Sunday is an "open house" for all visitors. Here is the revised schedule during Shih-fu's absence:

A.M. 9:00 Free (unguided) meditation
11:00 Chanting Buddha's name
11:30 Midday Offering
12:00 Vegetarian Lunch (donation)
12:45 Meditation Activities begin (including sitting, walking, yoga exercise.
 Free instruction for beginners)
2:00 Work Period
2:30 Meditation
4:00 Evening Service

*(Note: Donations to non-profit organizations can now be deducted on the IRS Federal Income Tax Short Form.)

The maintenance of our center and its activities depend upon contributions from members and friends. If you would like to help support us, any effort will be greatly appreciated. Those interested in offering time and labor may call the center at (212) 592-6593. Anyone who may wish to contribute financially, please make your check payable to the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture, and mail to the address given below. Your donation is tax-deductible. *

Of course, we encourage everyone to visit and participate in our activities.



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